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AUTHOR	Wilson, Jennifer
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ABSTRACT

The America Reads Challenge (ARC) program, part of AmeriCorps, has the primary goal of ensuring that all children can read proficiently by the end of third grade. In Mississippi, the ARC program is referred to as the America Reads-Mississippi (ARM) program. In 1999, 37 schools in 25 school districts participated in this program, sponsored by 3 regional centers in Mississippi. An evaluation was conducted to study program history, examine impact on student reading achievement and student attitudes, and determine the attitudes of volunteer tutors, regional coordinators and assistant coordinators, and site supervisors (n=13). Findings show that principals did not have time to serve as site supervisors, and program implementation varied among program sites. However, standardized achievement test scored improved for students involved in ARM, and reading performance improved. Students in the program enjoyed reading, and tutors appear to be beneficial in helping students' interest and proficiency in reading. Tutors themselves had positive attitudes about the program, although they thought more training would be useful. Recommendations are made for program improvement. (Contains 19 references.) (SLD)

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE AMERICA-READS MISSISSIPPI PROGRAM: WHAT WORKS AND WHAT DOESN'T WORK

Jennifer Wilson, Ph.D.
Delta State University

A paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association
in Biloxi, MS, November 6, 2003

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is an important skill that is needed to successfully function in life. Students must be able to read in order to solve mathematical problems, to conduct scientific experiments, and to comprehend the major works of American literature. Students who do not learn to read well are at a major disadvantage in school (Wasik, 1997). According to Lewis (1997), a large majority of students who have not learned to read well at the conclusion of the third grade will continue to have difficulties reading in the ninth grade. Students who enter high school without having mastered essential reading skills have a greater likelihood of dropping out (Corporation for National Service, 1998).

Statistics concerning the status of reading as well as the rate of illiteracy in the United States reveal startling results. In 1998, 38% of fourth grade students in America did not achieve the very basic level of reading. Even more alarming, 60% of students in grades 4, 8, and 12 fell below the proficient level of reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Donahue, Voelkl, Campbell, & Mazzeo, 1999). In an address to Congress in 1996, former President Clinton called for Americans to work together to help all children learn to read by the end of grade 3. He then went on to establish the America Reads Challenge (ARC) program as part of a larger program entitled AmeriCorps (America Reads Challenge, 1996).

Organized by the Corporation for National Service (CNS), AmeriCorps is a national initiative in which full and part-time members serve in over 1,000 programs. AmeriCorps' mission is to improve the nation by providing needed services, ranging from education to public safety, in communities. In exchange for providing a year of service, AmeriCorps' members earn a living allowance and an education award that can be used to fund post-secondary education or to obtain vocational training (AmeriCorps, 1997).

ARC's primary goal is to help ensure that all children can read proficiently by the end of grade 3. Two basic components of the ARC program are (a) the America's Reading Corps and (b) Parents as First Teachers Challenge grants. The America's Reading Corps is a corp of 1 million tutors who assist over 3 million elementary children needing help in reading. Parents as First Teachers Challenge grants support programs that focus on assisting parents in helping their children become better readers. ARC is funded by an appropriation from Congress of $2.75 billion and is nationwide (America Reads Challenge, 1996).

In Mississippi, the ARC program is referred to as the America Reads-Mississippi (ARM) program. ARM has three regional centers: Alcorn State University (ASU), Delta State University (DSU), and Mississippi State University (MSU). In 1999, 37 schools in 25 school districts participated in the program. Two hundred fifty ARM members worked in the schools. DSU and MSU each had 100 ARM members, while ASU had 50 ARM members (America Reads-Mississippi, 1999).

ARM objectives for 1999-2000 tutors and staff were as follows:

1. Two hundred fifty ARM members will provide one-on-one and small group tutoring, while supporting and enhancing the classroom teachers' instructional programs, targeting 2,500 lowest quartile kindergarten through third grade students in Level 1 and 2 public schools for 30 minutes a day at least four times per week, resulting in 50% of the students improving their reading comprehension skills by at least one grade level.

2. Two hundred fifty ARM members will provide after-school tutoring in the schools and/or communities targeting 500 kindergarten through third grade students in Level 1 and 2 public schools for (an average of) 1 ½ hours at least one day per week, resulting in 50% of the students who regularly attend the after school program improving their reading comprehension skills by at least one grade level.

3. Two hundred fifty ARM members will plan and implement at least one statewide community service project (to be determined by the entire corps) and one local community service project (which will be identified to meet local needs), resulting in an increase in the number of ARM partners and (on average) 2,500 volunteer hours logged for community service projects as measured by the Service Project Volunteer Logs, Service Project Planning Committee Meeting Logs, and media coverage of the community service projects.

4. ARM staff will coordinate (on average) monthly opportunities for 250 ARM members to develop their tutorial skills, school and community strengthening skills, and member development skills to a satisfactory rating as measured by the Member Skill Assessment Survey.

5. ARM staff will coordinate training opportunities regarding the critical teacher shortage, as well as the legislative passed incentives to help one become a Mississippi teacher, to 250 ARM tutors resulting in an increased awareness of the critical need for teachers in the state and the ways and means available to tutors to become certified teachers as measured by the Members Exit Survey.

6. ARM staff will coordinate opportunities for 250 ARM members to learn about their local colleges' enrollment procedures, financial aid opportunities, and other logistics necessary for college enrollment resulting in 90% of the tutors indicating that they are more likely to enroll in college as a result of their ARM experience as measured by the Member Exist Survey.

7. Two hundred fifty ARM members will facilitate outreach and communication to parents of 2,500 tutored children through newsletters, phone calls, conferences, invitations to classroom activities and school events, home visits, and other communication means for a minimum of 5 hours per week as measured by the Parent Outreach Communication Log, resulting in increased parental awareness of their child's educational progress as measured by the Parent Increased Awareness Survey.

8. Two hundred fifty ARM members will recruit 250 parents and community volunteers to tutor children in school and/or out of school (on average of) at least 1hour per week during the regular academic year, resulting in at least 7,500 volunteer hours logged as a result of ARM volunteer generation as measured by the Volunteer Attendance Logs.

Thousands of volunteers serve as reading tutors across the nation. Research indicates that tutoring programs in which volunteers and other nonprofessionals serve as tutors can be very effective in helping to improve students' reading skills. For example, students with deficiencies in reading who receive tutoring show greater gains in reading than students with deficiencies in reading who do not receive tutoring (United States Department of Education, 1997).

The presence of certain factors in volunteer tutoring programs generates positive achievement results (Wasik, 1998). These factors include:

1. A certified reading specialist needs to supervise tutors.
2. Tutors need ongoing training and feedback.
3. Tutoring sessions need to be structured and contain basic elements.
4. Tutoring need to be intensive and consistent.
5. Quality materials were needed to facilitate the tutoring model.
6. Assessment of students need to be ongoing.
7. Schools need to find ways to ensure that tutors will attend regularly.
8. Tutoring need to be coordinated with classroom instruction. (pp. 565-569)

According to Blendinger (1996), the principal's role in the school's instructional program is important. The principal must provide instructional leadership if the teaching of reading is to improve in a school. McEwan (1998) maintains that the person who carries the major responsibility for ensuring that teaching and learning takes place in America's schools is the school principal.

Teachers' perceptions of their principal as an instructional leader play a critical role in school improvement efforts. Blendinger (1996) contends that the principal should be "involved in curriculum and instructional matters to the degree that teachers perceive that their interaction with the principal improves teaching and learning" (p.55). In support of Blendinger's position, Andrews and Soder (1987) report a positive correlation between students' gains in reading and mathematics and teachers' perceptions of the principal as an instructional leader. If America Reads is to be successful in Mississippi, it is important to study how the program is being implemented in the schools and what principals and others involved in the implementation report.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated the ARM program in relation to eight objectives:

1. Write a history of the ARM program from its inception in 1998 to the present. In writing the history, attention was given to identifying the program's visionaries, goals and objectives, administration and staffing, financial resources, number of participating students, number of ARM tutors, and number of schools involved.

2. Critically examine norm-referenced test information collected by ARM officials to determine the program's impact on the reading achievement of students involved.

3. Critically examine information collected by ARM officials to determine the attitudes of students involved in the program toward reading.

4. Critically examine information collected by ARM officials to determine what site supervisors of schools involved in the program report regarding its strengths and weaknesses.

5. Critically examine information collected by ARM officials to determine what tutors participating in the program think about it.

6. Interview ARM regional coordinators to identify their views regarding the program.

7. Interview ARM assistant regional coordinators to identify their views regarding the program.

8. Interview site supervisors of schools involved in the ARM program to identify their views regarding the program.

The term "critically examine" as used in some of the objectives refers to analyzing and interpreting data routinely collected by ARM officials to meet federal regulations.

Justification for the Study

Reading is an important skill needed to successfully function in school and in life. Children who do not read well by the end of the third grade have significantly decreased chances for success in school because all other subject areas utilize the important skill of reading (America Reads Challenge, 1998).

In Mississippi, the ability of children to read is a major concern. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) (1998), the percentage of Mississippi fourth grade students who fell below the basic level of reading was 52%, compared to 39% for the nation. Likewise, results from the 1998 Iowa Test of Basic Skills, a norm-referenced assessment administered by the Mississippi Department of Education, revealed that 30.5% of fourth grade students scored in the lowest quartile on the national distribution (Mississippi Department of Education, 2000).

ARM's major goal is to help ensure that every child can read proficiently by the end of the third grade (America Reads-Mississippi, 1999). Although ARM was implemented three years ago, no systematic research, prior to this study, had been conducted to assess the impact of the program on the reading achievement of students being served. ARM needed to be investigated to determine what difference, if any, it is making in the reading achievement of students being tutored.

Theoretical Basis

Systems theory served as the theoretical perspective for this study. According to Lunenburg and Ornstein (2000), a system is defined as a "set of interrelated elements that function as a unit for a specific purpose" (p. 14). There are five basic parts to a learning system: inputs, learning process, outputs, feedback, and the environment. Inputs are resources used to produce outputs. Outputs are products and services. In order to produce the outputs, the inputs undergo a transformational process. Forces within the environment react to the quality of the outputs and provide feedback to the organization (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000).

For the purpose of this study, inputs were defined as: (a) the ARM tutors and coordinators, (b) site supervisors, (c) students, (d) funding, and (e) guidelines for effective volunteer tutoring programs. The learning process is the interaction among individuals involved in the program that leads to students acquiring essential skills needed in order to read well. Outputs are students who know how to read. Feedback includes students' reading achievement, students' attitudes toward the program, and attitudes of persons involved in ARM toward the program. The environment includes society's demand for increased student academic achievement and legislators wanting returns (students with improved reading skills) on the investment of funds into the ARM program.

Research Design

The study's subjects were (a) leaders who brought the program to Mississippi, (b) ARM's state director, (c) ARM's regional coordinators, (d) ARM's assistant regional coordinators, and (e) 13 site supervisors who have been involved in the program from its inception. Data collected by ARM officials were also analyzed.

Two ARM regional centers were involved in the program for over two years: DSU and MSU, while ASU, the newest regional center, has been involved in the program for one year (America Reads-Mississippi, 1999).

Mixed methods--qualitative and quantitative--were used to collect data from three sources: (a) ARM archival documents; (b) surveys administered by ARM officials; and (c) interviews with key informants such as the program's visionaries, state director, regional coordinators, assistant regional coordinators, and site supervisors. The key informant approach involved interviewing individuals who had special knowledge of the program.

ARM archival documents contained the program's (a) goals and objectives, (b) administration and staffing, (c) financial resources, (d) number of participating students, (e) number of ARM tutors, and (f) number of schools involved. Archival documents are available at the ARM state office located at 3825 Ridgewood Road, Suite 612, Jackson, Mississippi.

Gates-MacGinitie Reading Tests, 4th edition, (GMRT) were used by program officials to assess students' reading performance. The GMRT, a norm-

referenced assessment, provided a standardized survey of reading achievement for students tested and contained several levels: Pre-reading, Beginning reading, Levels 1-2, Levels 3-12, and Adult reading (Riverside Publishing Company, 2000). Student achievement data are available at the ARM's state office located at 3825 Ridgewood Road, Suite 612, Jackson, Mississippi.

Surveys administered by ARM officials were analyzed to determine key informants' perceptions of the program. ARM officials administered these surveys to site supervisors, tutors, and students participating in the program.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the visionaries who were instrumental in bringing the program to Mississippi. Interviews were also conducted with the state director, regional coordinators, assistant regional coordinators, and 13 site supervisors. The interviewing process involved asking a number of structured (closed-ended) questions and then exploring the responses in greater depth using open-ended questions to obtain more information (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

Key informant data collected from interviews with the program's visionaries, the state director, regional coordinators, assistant regional coordinators, and site supervisors were analyzed for the purpose of identifying emerging themes. Categories were established based upon any recurring regularities found in the data. Verbatim responses to the interview questions were edited and summarized. Extreme care was exercised not to change or distort information.

Responses to questions and statements on surveys administered by ARM officials were tabulated and described. Frequencies (i.e., number of respondents selecting a specific response) and percentages were summarized and presented in table format. Student performance on the GMRT was analyzed by comparing pre-test scores obtained in November 1999 with post-test scores obtained in April 2000.

Limitations

Only 13 of the 31 site supervisors participated in the study due to restrictions in terms of time and cost. Although the site supervisors were randomly selected, they may not have been representative of the entire group.

Survey data examined may be biased in terms of providing socially acceptable responses based upon what respondents thought ARM officials wanted them to report.

Any improvements in students' reading achievement may have been due to the fact that participants received extra attention and resources.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This section presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of this study. It was important that a study be conducted by an independent researcher because the information reported to date concerning the program has been disseminated primarily from two resources: (a) the ARM officials

themselves and (b) the University of Mississippi's Center for Educational Research and Evaluation, which administered the norm-referenced assessments to students. Although the ARM program was implemented over 2 years, at the time of this study no systematic research had been conducted to investigate the program. The study of the ARM program presented in this document is the first known research of its kind conducted in Mississippi. This section presents (a) a summary of the findings, (b) conclusions, and (c) recommendations.

Summary of the Findings

Although the program's visionaries hoped that principals would serve as site supervisors, it was evident that principals could not give sustained attention to the project and monitor it as needed. Visionaries came to view the role that principals needed to take was to provide "figurative" administrative support, rather than literal support. In this role, principals were expected to generally oversee implementation of the program, communicate the importance of the program, and provide administrative assistance as needed.

In some ARM schools, principals actually served as site supervisors. In other schools, assistant principals, federal program coordinators, and certified teachers assumed this role. According to Wasik (1998), one of the key elements needed for the implementation of a successful volunteer tutoring program was to have a certified reading specialist supervise the tutors. This person would possess the expert knowledge needed to observe the tutoring sessions, analyze

what occurred, and then develop appropriate strategies that tutors could use during tutoring sessions.

Reading achievement for students participating in the program improved. During the second year of program implementation, reading comprehension as measured by the Gates-McGinitie Reading Tests (GMRT) improved 13 points, and total reading performance improved 27 points. Although it would be presumptuous to solely attribute this increase to the ARM program, it is possible that the ARM program was a factor that contributed to test score increases.

First through third grade students surveyed from the Delta State University (DSU) and Mississippi State University (MSU) regional centers were positive in their attitudes toward reading. The majority of the students from the DSU regional center indicated that they enjoyed reading and that their ARM tutor encouraged them to read more. The majority of the students from the MSU regional center indicated that they thought reading was fun and that they liked reading with their tutor. Research indicates that one of the benefits students receive from one-to-one tutorial assistance in reading is an overall increase in positive feelings toward reading (Cohen, 1981).

ARM site supervisors were very positive concerning the program and said that the program's number one strength was providing one-to-one tutoring assistance to students having reading difficulties. ARM site supervisors also said that the amount of paperwork required for program implementation needed to be reduced.

ARM tutors were very positive regarding the program. Tutors from the three regional centers indicated that they were satisfied with the training received, the skills learned, the support received from ARM staff, and their overall experience in the program. Different surveys were administered by ARM officials to assess tutors' attitudes toward the program.

Throughout the program, ARM tutors received training at the state, regional, and local levels. At the state level, tutors attended two statewide conferences at which sessions were provided that focused on accomplishing the goals and objectives of the program and covered topics ranging from effective tutoring strategies to volunteerism. At the regional level, tutors attended monthly training sessions that were focused on accomplishing the goals of the program, with the primary goal being to provide one-to-one tutoring to students experiencing difficulties in reading. At the local level, ARM tutors participated in school-based staff development and training sessions.

Although a large number of training sessions were provided, ARM site supervisors and tutors identified that providing more training for tutors in effective tutorial strategies was one way in which the program could be improved. Research indicated that providing intensive and ongoing training is one of the elements necessary for the implementation of a successful volunteer tutoring program (Wasik, 1998).

The majority of the tutors were satisfied with the recognition that they received throughout the program for services provided. In the ARM program,

tutors received recognition through ARM newsletters and award ceremonies. In addition, they received incentives such as stipends and education awards for providing service in the program. According to Wasik, (1998), one of the key elements necessary for the implementation of a successful volunteer tutoring program was that incentives need to be provided to ARM members to recognize and celebrate their efforts and convey to them that they **are** valued and appreciated (Wasik, 1998).

According to the regional and assistant regional coordinators, program implementation varied among school sites. Some of the schools had structured reading programs in place, such as "Success For All," with reading tutors following specific plans and procedures outlined in the program guidelines. Other schools did not have structured reading programs in place, and tutors followed plans and procedures that were determined by the teacher or the site supervisor. According to Wasik (1998), one of the key elements necessary for the implementation of a successful volunteer tutoring program is that tutoring sessions should be structured and contain basic elements (Wasik, 1998).

At the local level, the ARM program was monitored primarily by site supervisors and assistant regional coordinators. Some of the site supervisors met with tutors on a weekly basis to discuss program implementation and to provide feedback to tutors concerning their performance, while others met with tutors on a daily to discuss program implementation and to provide feedback concerning performance. Also, assistant regional coordinators visited schools on

a monthly or bi-monthly basis to monitor the implementation of the program. Wasik (1998) indicated that one of the key elements necessary for the successful implementation of a volunteer tutoring program was that tutors needed ongoing monitoring, supervision, and feedback concerning their performance.

Key informants (regional coordinators, assistant regional coordinators, and site supervisors) identified the following as strengths of the program: (a) providing tutorial assistance to students who were struggling in learning to read, (b) providing quality training and professional development to tutors, and (c) providing financial assistance to tutors to attend a college or post-secondary institution.

Regional and assistant regional coordinators said that more frequent monitoring of the school sites was needed and regional coordinators said that the amount of paperwork needed to be reduced.

Conclusions

The findings from the investigation of the ARM program suggest eight conclusions:

1. Principals do not appear to have the time to serve as site supervisors. Also, they were not certified reading specialists.

2. Standardized achievement test scores increased for students involved in the ARM program. Students' reading performance improved.

3. Students participating in the program enjoyed reading and reading with their tutors encouraged them to read more. Tutors appear to be beneficial in helping to increase students' interest and proficiency in reading.

4.Regional coordinators and site supervisors voiced dissatisfaction with the amount of paperwork required for program implementation. Ways need to be identified to reduce the amount of paperwork required for program implementation.

5. ARM tutors are positive toward the ARM program. Tutors appear to enjoy working with students and being a part of the ARM program. In determining what ARM tutors thought about the program, across regional centers, ARM officials administered different surveys.

6. Although ARM tutors participated in ongoing monthly training sessions, more training appears needed. Findings suggest that additional training in effective tutorial strategies needs to be provided for ARM tutors.

7. Program implementation varied among school sites. According to the coordinators, school officials decided how the ARM tutors would be used at their sites. Some of the schools had structured reading programs in place that outlined specific guidelines for tutors to follow; other schools did not. For those schools that did not have structured reading programs with specific guidelines for tutors to follow, additional assistance may be needed in establishing guidelines on how to effectively use the tutors.

8. Although the program is monitored by assistant regional coordinators and site supervisors (e.g., assistant regional coordinators visit schools one or two **times** per month to monitor implementation and to provide feedback and suggestions to site supervisors and ARM tutors on ways in which the program can be improved), more frequent monitoring is needed in order to effectively gauge implementation and to provide specific suggestions on ways the program can be improved.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on the findings from this investigation of the ARM program.

1. Although principals may have the desire to be site supervisors, in most cases, there are too many demands and responsibilities associated with the principalship that hinder them from effectively assuming this role. Schools that have certified reading specialists on staff should designate these individuals to assume the role of site supervisor. However in schools that do not have certified reading specialists on staff, certified teachers with training in reading should assume this role.

2. Since the ARM program has only been implemented for a short time in Mississippi schools, there is a need for continual research to determine the program's long-term impact on the reading achievement and attitudes of students toward reading. Findings in this study suggest that students' reading performance, as measured by norm-referenced test scores, improved. Two years

of students participating in the program is too short a period of time for determining whether short-term gains on standardized reading tests are lasting. Do children really go on to become proficient readers? It is recommended that longitudinal studies be conducted following students from the time they enter the program to the time they graduate from high school.

3. Key informants identified that excessive paperwork is required for program implementation. It is recommended that the amount of paperwork be streamlined. Also, the possibility of using technology as a tool for information dissemination and documentation may be cost effective and worth exploring.

4. Surveys were used throughout the ARM program to assess site supervisors, tutors, and students' attitudes regarding the program. However different surveys were administered across regional centers. It is recommended that a standardized set of surveys be used across regional centers in order to compare responses and effectively evaluate the overall program.

5. ARM tutors are provided monthly training opportunities. However, assistant regional coordinators, site supervisors, and tutors indicated a need for additional training in tutorial strategies. It is recommended that additional training in tutorial strategies be provided for all ARM tutors. Also, for first year tutors, intensive training in effective tutoring strategies needs to be provided at the beginning of the program. In conducting training sessions, it is also recommended that varied presentation and delivery methods be used and

learning styles inventories be administered to determine how ARM tutors learn best.

6. Research indicates that volunteer tutoring programs need to be structured and contain basic elements. For those schools that do not have structured reading programs and specific guidelines for tutors to follow, it is recommended that a paradigm or model of a research-based volunteer tutoring program be provided to site supervisors. By providing a research-based model that schools can use along with providing assistance in helping them to implement the model, this may increase the likelihood of schools implementing a successful volunteer tutoring program and using tutors effectively.

7. Assistant regional coordinators visited schools on a monthly or bi-monthly basis to monitor implementation. It is recommended that (a) more regional staff members be hired to assist in monitoring the program and (b) more regional centers established in order that school sites can be assigned to centers closer in proximity.

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